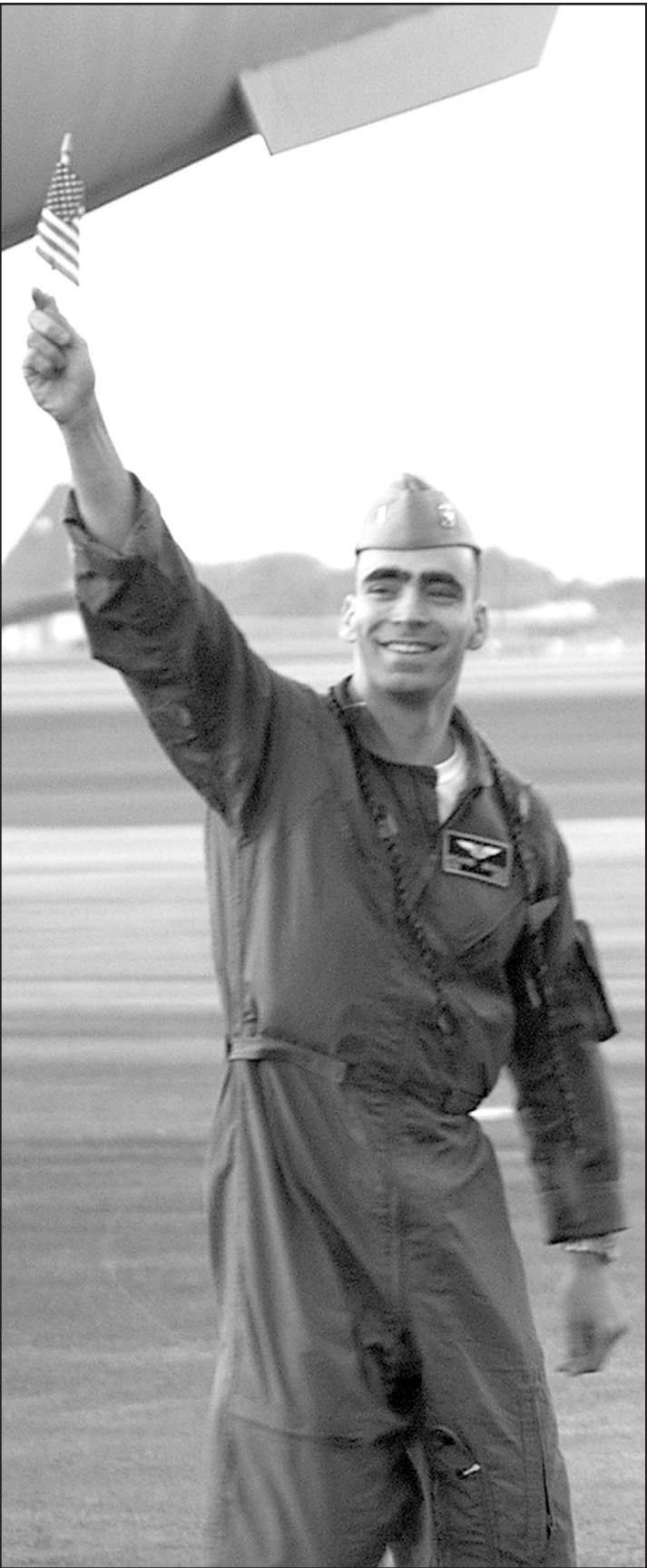




PH2(AW) Elizabeth L. Burke photo

Adm Tomas B. Fargo, Commander in Chief United States Pacific Fleet, introduces mission commander, Lt. Shane Osborne to the crowd at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, April 12.

FREEDOM



PH2(AW) Elizabeth L. Burke photo

EP-3 crewmember, Lt. Steven Blocher raises an American flag upon his arrival at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, yesterday.

Aircrew: Returning home as heroes

Continued from A-1

the past 12 days, it definitely helps.”
As the Pacific Fleet Band skillfully played “God Bless America,” the returning crewmembers stepped off an Air Force C-17 cargo plane aptly named “The Spirit of Bob Hope” from Guam about 6:30 a.m., after crossing six time zones in two days.
The crewmembers departed Hainan Island, China and arrived in Guam about 6 p.m. Hawaii time Wednesday. In Guam, they had the opportunity to relax for about three hours. During their layover, crewmembers were able to freshen up, eat and make phone calls home to family and friends before continuing on to Hawaii for the next leg of their mission.
As they debarked the plane in Hawaii, the crewmembers, led by Lt. Osborn, were greeted by a host of dignitaries including Senator Daniel Inouye, Senator Daniel Akaka, Representative Neil Abercrombie, Representative Patsy Mink, Adm.

Thomas B. Fargo, Commander-in-Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet, Rear Adm. Michael Holmes, Commander Patrol and Reconnaissance Force, Pacific, and others.
“You should know that we’re all very proud of you for the way you conducted yourself these past two weeks and for the high spirit and professionalism you demonstrate in the service of your country every day,” said Fargo in a brief statement after the debarkation.
“We’re lucky to have men and women like you protecting the interests of our nation,” added Fargo. “So it’s wonderful for me to have the pleasure to say both “welcome back” and “well done” to this great crew.” Adm. Fargo went on to statement from Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld.
In the statement, Rumsfeld praised the crewmembers for their actions.
“Throughout your days in detention, you conducted yourselves with honor and professionalism and held your heads high. America could not have had better representatives of the ideals we value.
“You’re models for the noble work that men and women in uniform perform on behalf of their nation every day. You put your lives at risk in the service so that the citizens of a grateful nation can live their lives in peace and freedom. The president is grateful. I am grateful. America is grateful. And we welcome you back to the United States. May your reunion with family and loved ones be a joyous one indeed.”
At a press conference held Wednesday afternoon at Naval Station Pearl Harbor, Rear Adm. Michael Holmes, Commander Patrol and Reconnaissance Force, Pacific cited

that the crew’s mission is not yet complete.
“Typically when a crew comes back from a mission, they have an intelligence portion that has to be debriefed and they have an operational portion which needs to be debriefed,” said Holmes. “In this case we’re also going to provide about an hour and a half of routine medical debriefing.”
Regarding the actions of mission commander, Lt. Osborn, Holmes described the pilot’s actions as heroic. “In my mind he is a hero. His actions allowed 24 people to come home,” said Holmes.
After Thursday’s welcoming ceremony at Hickam Air Force Base, crewmembers were whisked away to neighboring Pearl Harbor Naval Complex to begin a two-day series of debriefs.
Upon completion of the debriefs, the crew is scheduled to board a plane Saturday morning for Whidbey Island, Wash. where they will be reunited with their family and friends during a homecoming celebration.
“I’d like to express that I’m very, very proud of my Sailors,” said Holmes. “Every day men and women in uniform can be put at risk at a moment’s notice. And Americans around the world should be very, very proud of the conduct of our 24 service men and women and what they have done as we welcome them back.”
In case the mission commander had any doubts, the thoughts of the nation were best expressed during a conference call when President George W. Bush told the entire crew “As a former F-102 pilot, Shane you did one heck of a job. The nation is proud of all of you.”



PH2(AW) Elizabeth L. Burke photo

An anxious crowd stands by at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, awaiting the return of the EP-3 crew from China, April 12.